

# Storytellers Share Fatherhood Tales Through 'Manecdotes'



ON THE TOWN  
David Laurell

Stories have the power to make us learn, laugh, cry, determine our religious and political tenets and frame our knowledge of history. They shape the way we think and, perhaps, at their most powerful, change the way we think.

No one knows that better than Suzanne Weerts, who has proved that stories also have the power to raise much-needed funding for local organizations that possess the tools to change lives.

This past week, for the 15th time, Weerts' company, JAM Creative, once again raised funds for the Family Service Agency of Burbank by giving eight storytellers the opportunity to share touching and humorous tales about fatherhood.

It was four years ago that Weerts presented her first "Manecdotes" production to honor fathers. Staged at the Colony Theatre, this annual event has become a June tradition.

The 2024 father-fest began with the musical stylings of Burroughs High School alumna Sage McNeely accompanied by her father Ray Mae. Sage, who was a member of the show choirs at Burroughs, has performed at many prestigious venues and consistently earned high praise from Katy Perry, Lionel Richie and Luke Bryan during her 2022 appearances on ABC's "American Idol."

With the audience duly warmed-up, Weerts took to the stage to welcome the assemblage.

"Tonight's performance is raising money for an organization that has been providing mental healthcare in our community for over 70 years, for students, families, foster children, survivors of domestic violence, couples, and veterans," said Weerts.

Recognizing the veterans in attendance, Weerts then provided a touching tribute to her 80-year-old father who served in the U.S. Navy for seven years and 21 days on nuclear submarines.

The evening's main event — a potpourri of pop praise — took attendees through a series of stories inspired by each teller's fatherly affinity.

In her presentation, "Bawling in Bushwick," Pilar Alessandra, a writer and podcast host, related the difficulties turned acceptance her husband experienced when their 19-year-old daughter moved from California to Brooklyn.

Juanita Mantz, a lawyer, author and podcaster who works as public defender specializing in representing the mentally ill, shared a poignant tale she called "The Big O." Her story revealed her father to be a dreamer with poor business skills who fought the demon of alcoholism. While a business he established failed, she said he actually succeeded in inspiring her to always dream big.

Ron Hart, a television writer and producer, produced smiles by reminiscing on a time he hurriedly bought a bra for his teenage daughter just before she competed in a state qualifying gymnastics meet in a funny fathering flashback entitled "Training Day."

Actor Jonathan Tipton Meyers' ora-

tory offering, "My Best Friend," told of a time, when as a teen he made a discovery in a journal kept by his father that revealed just how much his son meant to him.

Alexandra Helfrich, vice president of a film production company who has been a longtime advocate of providing quality arts education in Burbank public schools, presented her "manecdote," entitled "Slim." The tale introduced the audience to her father, who after six unsuccessful marriages to women, finally embraced his homosexuality. He even appeared in an ad for Absolut Vodka who, over the years, launched a variety of worldwide campaigns in support of the LGBTQ+ community.

"Embracing his authentic self makes him a hero to his children and grandchildren," said Helfrich.

Because playwright Brent Beerman's dad's brother, uncles, and father all died at the age of 57, he was certain he would also. When 57 came and went without his demise, the now octogenarian, who hadn't planned for old age, is now gifting his son — who is also beyond 57 — with greater understanding of how to make the most out of any age.

Carlos Kotkin elicited both laughter and tears in "Ready or Not," a humorous and yet emotional account of his wife going into early labor before they had established a plan for the baby's arrival.

Rounding out the octet of storytellers, was Victoria Male, a screenwriter, journalist, and consultant for PocketFM who, like Weerts, was an alumna of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"The theme of fatherhood really tugged at my heartstrings," said Male in explaining why she wanted her narra-

tive, "The Missing Link," to be included in the production.

Added Male: "My dad was an outgoing, gregarious, and conservative guy. He was also a serious gofer, and being as he only had daughters, he was serious about our learning to play."

While many people can recall having a fun outing at a miniature golf course with their dad when they were kids, that was not the case for Male and her sister. "Mini golf was a serious learning endeavor for us," she said with a laugh.

"He taught me to play, and even though I was always in my sparkling pink gear with full make-up, with his guidance I got to the point that I could whack a ball 150 yards straight down the fairway," she added proudly.

Although she hasn't taken to the links since her father died unexpectedly, Male said that golf was the thing that formed a bond between her and her dad, and, as the years have gone by, provided her with the confidence and chutzpah he taught her to have on the course in navigating the male-dominated entertainment business.

"Even though he was very conservative, he actually proved to be a feminist by instilling those things in me," she added.

As of this performance, JAM Creative has raised over \$46,000 for local nonprofits. Along with the participants and attendees, last week's show was made possible by Westwind Media, Volpe-Gussow-Barnes Real Estate, GAIN Federal Credit Union, Chris Rizzotti Real Estate, Color Images Copy & Print, Towers in the Window and Susy Shearer Photography.

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Laurie Bleich, executive director of the Family Service Agency of Burbank, with Suzanne Weerts of JAM Creative at last week's show.



Bringing music to "Manecdotes," was the father and daughter duo of Sage and Ray Mae.



Photos by David Laurell / Burbank Leader

Brent Beerman, Ron Hart, Carlos Kotkin and Jonathan Tipton Meyers were the men who shared their "manecdotes."



Pilar Alessandra, Victoria Male, Alexandra Helfrich and Juanita Mantz provided "manecdote" musings on fatherhood.



Alexandra Helfrich shared a candid look at her father's courage during last week's show.



Among the attendees were local businessman Nat Rubinfeld, former City Councilman Tim Murphy, state Sen. Anthony Portantino, Lusine Hachobian of the Lusnet Collective, and Burbank Police Commissioner Romik Hachobian.